

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL BILL HIX, U.S. ARMY,
AFGHAN REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND-SOUTH VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 9:35
A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2008

Copyright (c) 2008 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (U.S. Navy, Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, October 24th, 2008. And my name is
Seaman William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public
Affairs. And I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today -- please remember to clearly
state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect
our guest's time, keeping questions succinct. And today, our guest is Army
Colonel Bill Hix. And he is commander of ARSIC-South, He will be discussing
the potential of Afghan national security forces.

And Colonel Hix, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead
with that. COL. HIX: Yeah, I'll be brief.

Thanks for having me on today and taking the time to hear what we have
to say here in ARSIC-South, which is the largest area, operational area in ISAF,
has the largest concentration of both Afghan forces and coalition forces and, I
think, the largest mix of NATO representation in ISAF as well, with Canadian,
British, Romanian, Dutch, Australian. I'm sure I've forgotten several other
nations represented here.

So it's quite a dynamic and interesting environment. And it's also --
we sit in the -- at the seat of Taliban country here in Kandahar. This is where
Talibanism, modern Talibanism originated and, of course, where Mullah Omar and
Osama bin Laden stayed for quite a while.

As the moderator said, I'm the commander of Afghan Regional Security
Integration Command-South. What that means is, I'm responsible for the
development of the Afghan army and police in Southern Afghanistan.

The areas that I'm responsible for are Zabul province, Kandahar
province, Helmand province and Oruzgan province. So each of those provinces has
a provincial task force lead -- British in Helmand, Canadians in Kandahar, the
Romanians in Zabul and then the Dutch in Oruzgan -- and then there are a variety
of other nations that provide support in each of those areas.

Prior to my current assignment, which I -- I assumed command here in
August -- I was the chief of staff for Combined Strategic -- correction --

Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, which is based in Kabul. That's my higher headquarters. We refer to that as CSTC-A, or the Afghans CFTC-Alpha, for whatever reason. I'm not sure. And they're responsible, at a national level, for the generation and development of both the Afghan National Army and Police.

And so as I enter my second year, I just want to tell you that I've seen a lot of progress in the Afghan army and police. The army's had about five years of concerted development and effort put into it, and it's really beginning to show. We really didn't get into serious police reform and development until last summer, and this is when we saw a large concentration of money and eventually U.S. troops put against the mentoring and development of the police force. And I have to say in the last year I've seen a lot of movement in that regard as well.

Probably the two best examples of this I can give you -- and I think most of you are familiar with the Sarposa Prison break in -- that happened here in Kandahar in June. And what's very important about that is, while the coalition responded to that incident, so did the Afghan government. Not only did the 205th Corps, which is the Afghan army corps responsible for the southern region, respond, but the Afghan National Army deployed about a thousand soldiers down here in less than 24 hours. And about 24 hours after their arrival, they were in the field in combat against the Taliban. Over half of those soldiers -- so better than 500 -- were flown down on Afghan National Army Air Corps aircraft. So that's a pretty big move for still a pretty young army.

And they did quite well. There were a number of problems, and probably one of the things that was most telling about their capabilities is in June the army and the police did not operate very closely together. Now, as you know, there are operations currently ongoing in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, where the Taliban had been pressuring the city. I would think that the description of Lashkar Gah being invaded or taken by the Taliban is way overblown.

But I was there last week, and I can tell you there was quite a bit of intimidation and concern in the population earlier in the week. And then as the nation again responded and pushed about 2,300 soldiers and policemen down there in about a day and a half, the mood in the city changed dramatically and they entered operations, again, about 24 hours after their arrival and have really put the Taliban on the run here over the last week.

And the fundamental difference between what's happening in Helmand today and what happened in Kandahar in June is that the army and the police are operating as an integrated team. In some cases, the police are fighting side-by-side with the army. In other cases, the police are conducting security operations in behind the police or providing security to a flank where the enemy is not as strong. And this is very gratifying.

The other component of this, it's important, is that there are army and police mentors from three different nations involved in supporting the Afghans as they conduct this fight. The British have what we call OMLT, Operational Mentor and Liaison Team, elements embedded in the Afghan army that are stationed in Helmand. They're in this fight. There are U.S. embedded training team mentors in one of the larger Afghan units being employed down there on the Army side. There are two police mentor teams from the U.S. embedded with policemen from Kandahar as well as policemen -- the border police who are from the Lashkar Gah area. And then there are Canadian OMLTs, Operational Mentor and Liaison

Team elements with units from the first brigade, which is from Kandahar Province, that also deployed in response to this emergency.

These operations are -- continue as I speak and have been pretty successful in the main. And I think that's -- that's what's important to understand, is the Afghans, in a relatively short period of time, have taken a big step forward. And I'm happy to say they've done it here in Region South with the 205th Corps and the regional police in the southern zone.

And with that, I'll take your question.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir. And Troy, you were on the line first.

Q Okay. Hello, sir. This is Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com.
COL. HIX: Yeah.

Q Can you get -- okay, just wanted make sure you hear me. Yes, sir. My first question -- and I'll just keep it to one right now, until we come back around. There's been a lot of talks of the need for unity of command.

There have been talks as far back as June from General McCaffrey's AAR, and there have been some other conversations around it lately, specifically around ARSIC-South. It has the largest fight, yet it doesn't have the largest U.S. presence, like RC East does.

Do you think it would be good to unify the command in heavy combat areas like ARSIC-South so that U.S. leadership could focus better on the fight and not have a split of leadership, especially with the -- not even just U.S. leadership, because you have the Marines coming doing in their own reporting structure and then you have the Brits and Canadians running things, and then of course the large fight down there. Generally what your views are on that, if it's a good thing, if it's moving forward? Your thoughts.

COL. HIX: Yeah. Well, hey, thanks for your question. I think, you know, the first big step that was taken to allow for unity of command here, of course, was naming General McKiernan as commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, so now he has a unity of command under his watch, both for OEF forces, you know, Enduring Freedom forces, on the U.S. side, and NATO ISAF forces, as well. So that's a first step. So we all work for the same boss at the end of the day and all operate within his intent. That's number one.

Number two, my job here in the south is to support the RC South commander, who currently is Canadian Major General Lessard. And I have no doubt who my customer is. He is the supported commander and I am the supporting commander. And just to -- in coalition warfare, the chain of command is often not as clean as all of us would like, but I think that there is a real sense -- and certainly since I've been down here -- a real sense of getting on with the mission and doing things together.

And, again, not to harp on Lashkar Gah too much, but this is a really good example of this. This is an Afghan-led operation. The planning and the support is enabled by Task Force Helmand, the British. As I said, we've got mentor teams embedded in the Afghan army and police from three different nations. We conduct coordination, but all of us are actually kind of taking our lead from the Afghan commander, who certainly doesn't work for anybody from

outside of Afghanistan because the Afghan army is, of course, sovereign to the nation of Afghanistan.

So while there -- there are times when there's some confusion and certainly on occasion, you know, national objectives may not synchronize completely, I would tell you, when it -- when the rubber hits the road down here, that the degree of cooperation is pretty -- pretty significant.

Q All right. Thank you very much, sir.

COL. HIX: Sure.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Josh, if you want to go ahead.

Q Good morning, sir. This is Josh Russo (sp) from the Institute for the Study of War.

COL. HIX: Okay.

Q My question is, dealing with Taliban and foreign insurgent operations, to what extent do you see a cohesive insurgent strategy in Regional Command South and could you -- if so, could you kind of describe it a little bit?

COL. HIX: Yeah, sure. I'll be happy to describe at least my view of what I think the insurgency is, here. As I mentioned in my opening statement, you know, Kandahar is kind of the seat of the Taliban and certainly is the object of the former leadership of this country who are now, you know, principally in Pakistan. So, in -- I think in terms of strategic direction and the objectives to regain control here in the south, there is some degree of central direction.

In terms of execution, my sense for the insurgency is that the -- and again I want to be clear, this is my sense -- is that they are -- they are fragmented along, you know, provincial and tribal and in some cases district or regional lines. And that's a function of a number of things, including terrain and the nature of the population in each area. So there are connections.

There are -- you know, leadership, some resources do cross back and forth across the border. There is direction that comes in. But it is -- it is certainly -- does not receive the kind of central direction that we would have characterized, say, the Viet Cong or, you know, North Vietnamese receiving during the Vietnam War or even the relatively centralized direction that you saw in ZAPU and ZANU in, say, the Rhodesian War.

The other component of this is I think we have to remember that this is a -- pretty much a -- certainly here a rural insurgency. And the tools the Taliban use here are intimidation and subversion of the population. And the elements of the government, particularly the police, are often a target that are picked out, by the Taliban, because they're the most visible form of government present in most of the districts and provinces here in the south.

I think in some respects, their grip on the population, in some of the larger cities, is less pronounced than it is in the countryside. But as we've seen in Lashkar Gah, their ability to operate on the fringes and to create a sense of insecurity can certainly turn the population in these larger cities, you know, give them a lot of fear and concern.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yes, it does, sir. Thank you.

COL. HIX: Certainly.

SEAMAN SELBY: Troy, did you have a couple follow-up questions?

Q I sure did. I thought we had someone else on.

SEAMAN SELBY: I didn't see anybody else. Yeah, go ahead with your follow-ups.

Q Okay.

Sir, I kind of, I understand that the Afghan forces in the 205th and ARSIC-South have been getting up-armored humvees and, of course, M-16s and M-4s. I'm also getting reports, I am personally, that, you know, troops as always, even when I was there, on their own with up-armor. They're having, sometimes having issues getting repaired, getting parts, things along that line.

I'm just kind of curious if you've heard anything, or if any of your commanders have reported to you, about this causing issues or morale issues or whatever, as the U.S. ETT and PMTs are working hard, to try to keep their trucks running, while they see the Afghan forces getting brand new ones.

COL. HIX: Well, we have not yet started fielding of the up- armored humvees to the Afghans. We will soon. Most of that will happen next year. We're in the process of training their master drivers and their training cadre, so that we can begin to phase those vehicles in over time. I'll be honest with you. Nobody has raised that issue to me. The soldiers that work for me are pretty self-reliant in many respects. And they're very resourceful.

I have to tell you that. They live pretty hard where they work. Particularly some of them are out in some very austere and remote places, working with the Afghans. And the Afghans have much less than they do, so I don't know that there is a sense that the Afghans are being treated better than they are.

Obviously, guys that are out in some of these remote locations do have concerns. But as one NCO I see at the team told me the other day -- he says, hey, look, we're ETTs -- embedded training teams; these guys work with the Army. He said, you know, if you can keep the logistics flowing out here -- and he wasn't talking about, you know, cable TV and three hots a day, it was just, you know, what they need to do their job. He said, this is what we want to do, and we're going to stay out here and do it. So I'd just tell you, I won't take anything away from that endorsement from this guy.

Now, having said that, we work hard to make sure that they are supported. You know, where I can't get them Internet access, we get them satellite telephones so they can call home. We make sure that they've got at least two means of communication, so that if they're in trouble, they can get to us. We work to make sure that they have multiple Blue Force Tracker, you know, digital communications devices in their trucks so that they don't lose coms out there.

We are, I think, getting better at providing logistics to them. We've started using a variety of different means of resupply, including air drops for some of these guys. And it -- we're not airdropping because there's no other way to get to them, we're airdropping because it's a more effective use of time and resources because to get some of these places over ground -- as you know, Afghanistan is very austere. You know, it can be, you know, two days of hard driving to get to a place where we can load the stuff that they need up on a pallet and drop it into them with no commitment of external resources or pulling Afghan troops away from going after the enemy to run a resupply convoy.

Does that help?

Q Right. Yes, sir, very much so. I've got a couple more questions. Is that okay?

COL. HIX: All right. Yeah, sure. You guys work that out and I'll give you -- (off mike). SEAMAN SELBY: Actually, yeah. Is it Troy?

Q Go ahead.

SEAMAN SELBY: Yeah, go ahead and then we'll get Josh. If that's okay, we'll move onto you and you can have your follow-up questions also.

Q Me first or Troy first?

SEAMAN SELBY: Well, actually -- Troy, how many more questions do you have?

Q I have two more.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. Actually, we'll go back and forth -- just go back and forth among yourselves.

Go ahead, Josh.

Q Sir, I've seen some reports in Afghan press talking about Taliban sort of making -- infiltrating -- making penetrations into Daikundi and Gohr (ph) -- or Ghowr province, to the north of Oruzgan, trying to basically set up some infrastructure, looking for supportive population. Do you -- obviously, that being a Hazara area, do you see that as being exaggerated and well off the mark, or -- and if not, how are they going about doing that?

COL. HIX: Yeah. Well, you know, we're in the process of doing voter registration in Daikundi right now. And there is one district, Gizab, which has a mixed population, but the -- as you know, most of -- or, sorry, Daikundi is Hazara. And so far, we've had no incidents in the entire province as we continue through voter registration up there. And I think that's a pretty good indicator because I don't know that an election is necessarily in the interests of the Taliban. But they have not taken any concerted effort to disrupt the process up there.

So I think that would be an indicator of a general lack of strong influence of the Taliban.

I'm not suggesting that they're, you know, completely absent from Daikundi, but I think in general you can say that the province is not pro-

Taliban and not susceptible to the degree of intimidation you see in other parts of Region South.

Ghowr, if you're talking about the district that's over in RC- West, is -- well, actually is in RC-West, and I'm not as familiar with that area as I am with my own area. I do know from talking to my counterpart out there that, you know, we did not have much of a presence there before -- and when I say "we," I'm talking about the larger coalition and Afghan security force population -- and we've been pushing in there here recently. So as we've found in most places, you know, the enemy's there, but nobody's challenging them, because they're -- again, they use intimidation, subversion, threats, threats of death, or they will, you know, kill people. We have people who are -- you know, wind up being assassinated or beheaded here on a recurring basis, which is enough to keep the -- you know, civilian population, certainly, in a state of intimidation.

So when we go into an area, they will challenge you. And so there may be an increase in violence up there. As I said, I don't track that on a daily basis. And it could well be just because we've begun to establish a presence there where we didn't have one before.

Q Thank you, sir.

Q Okay. This is Troy again. You know, there's been a concentrated effort in your PAO -- and just the news stories coming out have been great on the Afghan Air Corps. You mentioned earlier about -- after the Taliban prison break, after they used Afghan helos to get soldiers down there, of course getting the weapon -- new weapons and vehicles down range.

However, I'm kind of wondering what the effort and how much focus is being put on fighting corruption, which is by far the -- one of the underlying issues in why Afghanistan is having a hard time moving forward and what's taking it so long. But what's -- let's take -- what's happening to fight corruption, expose it, prosecute cases of it within the Afghan forces to show as an example that they can just -- that they can't keep going that way and there's punishment of they try to corrupt and take something for themselves?

COL. HIX: Sure. Right. Well, first thing I would tell you is both the Afghan army and police -- there are examples of where there -- where we -- where not we, but they have taken steps to counter corruption.

There's also a number of programs that we've instituted, most of them in the police, because the police have a much stronger reputation for corruption, you know, born of a long history of frankly being an instrument of illegal taxes and shakedowns over time -- in the past. On the army side, there is an increasingly energetic IG audit team program that's being put in place that does go out and look at corruption.

General Bismullah Khan has this year on two occasions had teams go out and review equipment accountability and pay and those kinds of things for soldiers and he will go out -- and he's a very charismatic guy, as you probably can gather -- and ask soldiers if they have problems. And if they do, he's very quick to hold leaders accountable and expect quick action to resolve the problems.

In terms of specific corruption, I know of at least one case here in RC South where we have a battalion commander who was accused of demanding kickbacks

from contracts in the area that he was operating. And if all things go to plan, he will be relieved of command here shortly. And the Afghans -- the issues were brought up actually through the -- this particular issue was brought up through Afghan channels. The Afghans took action and are, as I say, in the process of relieving him.

There are several other instances of officers who have been relieved for various indiscretions and criminal acts here in the last year.

On the police side, there are number of programs to kind of put in check access to police pay, which used to be one of the great arms of corruption. You know, the governor would get a cut, the district governor would get a cut, the chief of police would get a cut, and then the -- you know, the patrolman on the -- on the checkpoint or in the village would get some, you know, very small percentage of his salary.

Well, now, an increasing -- this is not completely implemented across Afghanistan, because as you can imagine, ATMs are not prolific here, but electronic fund transfer and bank cards are becoming an increasing fact of life in police pay.

As we go through a program talked focused district development, where we go into a police district -- it's kind of like a county within a state -- and effectively retrain, reform, in some cases -- (audio cuts off) --

SEAMAN SELBY: Hello? Uh-oh.

COL. HIX: (Audio cuts back in.) That process is entering all the policemen in that same program so that now nobody can touch their pay. And that's a big -- another step towards preventing or at least minimizing corruption.

We're in the early stages of looking to do the same thing on the army side because right now they have paymasters. It's kind of like the Army in the 1950s. Or actually, I was a paymaster at one point and I'm not quite that old. But we're beginning to look at doing electronic pay for soldiers and putting ATMs on Army bases here in Afghanistan for them. There is one example of where a pay officer was looking to take a cut, and he got nailed and he's under prosecution. So there's a couple of examples.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

Did we miss anything important on that? I'm sure that somebody else heard the loud beeping there.

Q I heard it, but -- I mean, it shut off pretty quickly.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, okay.

Okay, and Josh, did you have any more follow-up questions?

Q I do have one more follow-up question, sir, and it follows directly on my first question in terms of strategy. And I -- and I understand what you're saying with regard to the insurgency being very fragmented.

This question -- I'm wondering if you see -- mainly at the tri- border area of Oruzgan, Helmand and Kandahar, would you say that there are pieces of

key terrain -- whether it be mountainous terrain and/or just remote sort of hinterland where we are unable to go very frequently -- are there pieces of key terrain that the Taliban absolutely has to hold onto in order to continue to kind of threaten the populated areas and to have any foreseeable success in the future? SEAMAN SELBY: Well, I mean, there are a number of areas, not just in that tri-border area that you mentioned, where the Taliban do have, in effect, sanctuaries where we have either no effect or only episodic effect on them.

And it is from those areas that they're able to move out into other population centers and, you know, move into and threaten, or at least create the rumors of threats, to cities like Kandahar and Lashkar Gah or Garesh, as an example of -- the town up on the highway just north of Lashkar Gah.

Some of those areas have been disrupted here recently. You know, Garmsir, where the 24th MEU was at earlier this year, which has since been taken over by elements of Task Force Helmand and a battalion of the Afghan army along with the Afghan border police and Afghan uniform police, is an area that used to be a Taliban stronghold and an area that they used to transit supplies up into in the outer regions of Lashkar Gah. And of course, that's been all disrupted, and they're -- they've had to move out of that area. And we've been pretty successful in retaining the security in that area.

And one way to tell that you're being successful there is -- again, I was there -- I've been a couple of times. I was there just last week, before I went into Lashkar Gah. And there's a lot of building materials showing up in a bazaar. And I can tell you, in the early days, there was none of that. Commerce was really stilted. People's confidence in their future was pretty low. But over the last, you know, several months, even since -- in fact, it's actually improved since the Marines handed it over to the Afghans. And certainly it's nothing -- I mean, the Marines did a great job there, but I think the influx of professionally behaving Afghan soldiers and police -- because the police we've put in there were recently retrained -- is giving the people -- the population confidence. And so, you know, there's a degree of hope for the future there that they may have not had before.

The other component, of course, that's important is the governance. And the district leader in Garmsir has been quite successful in gaining the confidence of the people and the tribal elders and people like that down there.

So, you know, getting -- pushing the Taliban out away from the population, disrupting their safe havens in areas where they prepare before they come in to, you know, put IEDs on the road or intimidate a -- attack a checkpoint or whatever is really key to kind of keeping them off balance and putting them on the run while you can bring in these other, you know, elements -- civil elements, economic elements to give the people hope, and then they're less interested in listening to the Taliban.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

COL. HIX: Does that answer your question?

Q It does, sir. I was wondering if you could maybe just give another two or three by sort of prioritized of other significant sanctuary and/or staging areas that you see them operating out of them aside from Garmsir.

COL. HIX: I was going to say, we kind of pushed them out of Garmsir.

Q Yes, sir.

COL. HIX: I mean, there's some areas north of Musa Qal'eh. I don't want to be too specific. (Chuckles.) But, you know, there's some areas north of Musa Qal'eh. Clearly, there's a couple of areas in the more remote areas of Oruzgan where they've set up. Now, you know -- there are in some cases SF -- there's SF presence and, you know, Afghan army and police units up there who are, you know, starting to give the bad guys a run for their money. But that's certainly the case. There are some parts, you know, in the more mountainous areas in northern Zabul where they have -- there are some concentrations of enemy up there that will need to be dealt with over time. And I think we are certainly postured to do that here in the next year.

I mean, because as I mentioned the -- you know, the security forces -- I mean, the way -- the way to long-term stability here is really an Afghan solution. You know, not an Afghan face, but an Afghan solution. And I don't mean just, you know, some sort of a compromise. I mean the Afghan security forces actually getting after these force -- these enemy forces that seek to depose the government; you know, reinstate intimidation and violence against the population; things like that. And as we say, you know, the actions in Kandahar, the actions that are going on down in Lashkar Gah right now, are indicative of what they are increasingly capable of doing. And so as we continue to build the army -- you know, we just got approval to start building the army to 122,000 in structure and 134,000 in, you know, in total strength. So if you've got the ability to maintain a training account and continue to hone the skills of the army, that kind of thing, and a continued reform of the police where they become more effective.

I mean, where we've done this focused district development program, we -- in all the districts that we've done it, maybe with the exception of one, we have seen a significant drop in civilian casualties and a -- also a good drop -- maybe not a significant drop -- in police casualties. You know, last year, where we were losing police in groups 10s, 20s, 30s -- there was one incident where we lost 70 of them in one shot -- we're not seeing that now.

This is not to say that police are not still suffering higher levels of casualties, because they are. They're about three times the rate of the army and coalition. But that rate is beginning to drop because we're giving the police better training, better equipment, and we're able -- for those police that we have done that to, we've been able to provide mentors -- you know, essentially an EPT for those police districts. And we're working very hard to try to sustain that over time, and there are, you know, some plans to really thicken that effort as we move forward into next year.

Q Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. And do we have any more follow-up questions?

No?

Q That's all.

Q This is Troy. I've got one more, if I could.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, sure.

Q Sir, you know, ANP members in different districts of the east and the southeast have, in the last month, have attacked and killed two U.S. soldiers that they were serving jointly with. I'm just wondering if that has caused yourself or any of your commanders to take extra steps -- training or just direction towards your -- the PMTs or the EPTs to be extra vigilant when co-located/embedded? I mean, when I was there, we were always, you know, keeping our eye on things because you never knew, but I'm just wondering in this recent attacks -- two in one month -- if that's caused anyone to reinforce those -- the vigilance skills.

COL. HIX: Well, I mean, you know, these guys have a good sense of the people they're working with. And they do keep, you know, an eye on the entire situation, not just the people they're working with. But my impression is, you know, that my teams have a pretty good relationship of the people they work with. They -- you know, they do operate with them every day. They get to know them. They fight with them on a regular basis.

And we have not had -- I have not seen that kind of a problem here with the people -- with the Afghan army and police units that my guys work with, not towards my guys at all. And you know, knock wood, hopefully it will continue that way. And I think it's kind of like anything; if you have, you know, trust and confidence in each other and you share the same hardships and you work together, you're going to by and large be in a pretty strong position to move forward as a team.

This is not to say that we don't have our disagreements and guys don't have arguments and that sort of thing, but I have not seen, nor has anybody mentioned to me, a concern over the people that they're working with in terms of, you know, their safety/reliability. You know, some leaders may not be as good as others. I'll be delicate about what I'm saying in that regard. But we haven't had that problem down here yet.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

COL. HIX: Yep.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you again.

And thank you everybody, bloggers, for your questions today.

With that, Colonel Hix, do you have any final comments?

COL. HIX: Yeah. I'd like to just say thanks for your time and thanks for, you know, having an interest in what my guys are doing out here because I think what they're doing is probably the most important thing we can do, because their focus is on making the Afghan security forces successful. And obviously, none of the other things that need to happen in Afghanistan can happen without the population feeling confident in their security and that their government can protect them. Nothing else will move forward.

And I'm very proud of the work that they do. And I'm happy to tell anybody that the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen and even a couple of Marines that work for me do some pretty phenomenal work and are really the unsung heroes of this effort here, particularly in RC South.

And I'm also -- as I say, I've seen a lot of progress in the Afghan army and the police force. And I think over the, you know, the coming months,

certainly well into next summer, when I will probably leave, I think we will see that the Afghan forces begin take an increasing lead in this fight. The actions in Arghandab and outside Kandahar and now in Lashkar Gah show their power, and they can press their enemy as they move forward.

I think you're going to see continued improvement. Some of that will be done through the provision of new equipment, like the up- armored humvees that were mentioned here and, you know, new machine guns. They're going to be equipped -- the army will be equipped with Western weapons -- you know, basically the same kit we have. And they're going to be able to leverage that equipment and change the dynamics down here.

And I think when the Afghan army and the police forces are the ones that are taking the fight to the Taliban on a day-to-day basis, the confidence of the people is going to rise, and I think the concern of the Taliban is going to rise as well because they're no longer going to be able to claim that they're fighting an infidel army that's, you know, here to try to enslave the Afghan people or impose a colony or any of the other things that are, you know, the lies that are told about us. And when that happens, I think the Taliban's days are numbered. So my job is to accelerate that as quickly as possible because I think that's when you're going to begin to see this war won.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

COL. HIX: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Once again, thank you all for your questions. Today's program will be available online on the bloggers link on DOD.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as this audio file and print transcripts. Again, thank you Colonel Hix and our blogger participants.

Q Thank you, sir. I appreciate you taking the time to answer the questions.

COL. HIX: Not at all. Thanks for what you do.

SEAMAN SELBY: Roger that.

Q Thank you, sir. Bye bye.

END.